

**Sunday, March 22, 2020**  
**Fourth Sunday in Lent (Year A)**

John 9.1-41

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/144740313569297/>

*(Sermon begins at about 16:00)*

**“The Courage to Stand Up to Fear”**

In her book, *Fracture*, New York Times Bestselling Author Megan Miranda writes “Funny how everything can change in an instant. From death to life. From empty to full. From darkness to light.” Although, admittedly, right now it seems as if she has that backwards. Shouldn’t it be “Funny how everything can change in an instant. From life to death. From full to empty. From light to darkness.” From life to death caused by the rapid spread of a new disease. From full to empty shelves in the grocery store. From the light of hope to the darkness of fear.

Over the last few months, we have seen the world around us change radically. Just two and a half months ago, we heard about an outbreak of coronavirus in Wuhan, China. Sad news, but it seemed so far away, as if it wouldn’t—couldn’t—affect us. Then about three weeks later, there was news of the first reported case of coronavirus in the United States. We became a little more concerned, but life pretty much continued as usual, at least here. And then a couple weeks ago, things began changing at a rapid pace. An ever increasing pace. The stock market began reacting wildly. People started acting wildly, stockpiling toilet paper, hand sanitizer, and cleaning supplies. As concern spread, the church started taking notice. Earlier this month Bishop Taylor issued a directive that wine was no longer to be given at Eucharist. Just a week later, the President declared a state of emergency. That same day, people really began to freak out and reacted with panic buying of food items. Then last Tuesday, Bishop Taylor suspended all church activities until at least Easter. And then, on Thursday, Governor Newsom issued the “stay at home” order. And here we are. Unable to celebrate Eucharist in our worshipping communities. And not even able to live stream services from within our own church. How did we move so far from our comfortable day-to-day lives to a state of panic, to a fear of scarcity, to not being able to worship in our own churches? How do we even begin to respond to such a state of affairs?

Things indeed have changed in an instant, relatively speaking. So much so that our heads are still swimming, trying to sort out what this “new normal” looks like. And for your spiritual leaders, trying to figure out how we can continue to meet the pastoral and spiritual needs of our people while meeting the requirements of “social distancing” and directives to “shelter in place.” That’s why we’re here in this place—not St. Gregory’s, but my apartment—live streaming worship services to our community “in diaspora.” Trying to find a “new normal”—hopefully a short and temporary one—in which we can still be a community of faith, in which we can still be the Body of Christ. It’s very disorienting in so many ways.

But we are not alone in this life-changing-in-an-instant world, resulting in disorientation and uncertainty as to how to live into a new way of being. Just consider the man born blind in

today's Gospel reading. He had lived his whole life, into adulthood, blind. And in an instant, Jesus came along and changed all that. With a little spit and mud slapped on his eyes, the man's whole world changed in an instant. Things he could only sense before by smell and sound and touch were now visible, opening a whole new way of (literally) viewing the world around him. A whole new way of interacting with the world. A whole new way of being in the world.

Now, of course, the man's life changed for the better, while ours—not so much. But his approach to his “new normal” can provide some insight for us into how we approach our “new normal.” Even while the man was trying to come to grips with what this change in his life meant, while rejoicing in what he had gained, he was pressed by the Pharisees to buy into the societal norms that were really of their own devising, and which, as a result, became prevalent ideas in larger society. They had some silly notion that the healing the man received must be construed as work, which was forbidden on the Sabbath. The Pharisees try to get the man to turn on Jesus by confessing that he had indeed broken one of their laws. They tell him, “give glory to God.” In other words, tell the truth—at least, as they see it. Ironically, the Pharisees are blind to the real truth, standing on their “business as usual” perspective. “We are disciples of Moses.” In other words, Moses gave us the Law and the Law says work on the Sabbath is forbidden. They are stuck on the letter of the Law, unable to see the spirit of the Law. So much of this, and the constant tension between the Pharisees and Jesus, is because they are fearful of a new way of looking at God and their relationship with him. They are worried that they may lose some of their authority and not have the prestige they once enjoyed. So they interpreted the Law very narrowly. As a result, they are not open to new ways of doing things, new ways of living out God's laws.

The man was probably not well-educated. Having been born blind, it would have been viewed as not having been worth the trouble to educate him. And he certainly was not a person of power or influence. It would have been quite intimidating for such a person to go up against the Pharisees—against the Temple authorities, the elite of Jewish society. Yet, through his encounter with Jesus, the man found the courage to go toe-to-toe with them. To stand up for what he knew to be the truth based on his experience of Jesus—that he is loving and caring and compassionate. Motivated by pure faith, the man is able to not only argue with those deemed superior to him, but he does so and wins. Even if they don't realize it. Through his encounter with Jesus, the man who gained his sight gained so much more than physical sight. He gained spiritual sight. Spiritual insight into who God is and what God's laws really mean. The insights that the Pharisees have been blinded to, out of fear.

The man's response is poetic. And a real zinger. “One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.” His eyes are open to the truth of God's love in his own life, whereas the Pharisees have lost sight of God's truth. And of God's love. The man has experienced and turned to the truth, not to the truth of the religious authorities, not to the truth of the society in which he lives, but the truth that he saw through his newly opened eyes, through his newly opened heart. That God is not the God of the Law, but the God of Love. That God is not the God of fear, but the God of hope. That God is not the God of scarcity, but the God of abundance.

In our present circumstances, we do not have to go up against the religious authorities or even the elite of our own society. But we do have to go up against the very same forces that guided

and drove the actions of the Pharisees. The forces that, as a result, seeped into Jewish society in Jesus' time. Fear. For the Pharisees, this was a fear of losing control, of no longer being relevant, a fear of the unknown. Particularly if Jesus prevailed.

For us and our society today, we are certainly experiencing a fear of the unknown. Will I get coronavirus? Will someone I care about get it? Will I be able to survive, even if I don't get sick? How long will I be stuck in my house? How long will this insanity last? So much fear. And that motivates so many to operate out of a place of scarcity. That there is not enough for me to feel safe and secure. Not enough tests. Not enough distance between me and my neighbor. Not enough food. Not enough toilet paper.

The man born blind had the courage to stand up to the fear of the Pharisees and to claim and proclaim the truth that he experienced because of his encounter with Jesus. Not fear, but hope. Not scarcity, but abundance. Not animosity, but love. All because of his experience of Jesus. And that is exactly what we need to do in order to survive our current crisis. To claim and proclaim the truth that we know because of our own experiences of Jesus. The truth that we will celebrate in just a few weeks. How through Christ's death and resurrection, he overcame the fear. He overcame the scarcity. He overcame the animosity. That he defeated sin and death, giving us the hope and the promise of something better. New life. Eternal life.

At times like this, we need to hold onto that hope. We need to hold onto that promise. We need to hold onto the truth that is revealed in the experience we have of Jesus, of who Jesus is for us. Of what we will hear in the first verse of our closing hymn: "The king of love my shepherd is, whose goodness fails me never; I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine for ever."

And not just hold on to that hope. We need to find new and creative ways to express that hope. We need to find new and creative ways to be the community of faith, the Body of Christ, whose purpose is to proclaim God's message of hope to the world in word and action. Yes, that is challenging in times like this. When we have to practice social distancing. When we have to limit gatherings to no more than ten people. When we are directed to shelter in place and minimize interactions with others.

Many of us have extra time on our hands right now. What better use of that time than to find ways to connect with and strengthen the Body of Christ. To live into the commandment to love our neighbor. I could rattle off a list, but you are all clever people. Find what works for you and your situation. Find ways to connect with and help and encourage and support one another. Particularly those who are most vulnerable among us. Those who are probably most scared among us.

This need to connect and support one another is why we are here today. Why we are not letting the fact that we cannot gather in our church keep us from engaging in worship of our all-loving God. In this way, we remind ourselves that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves. Something bigger than St. Gregory's. We are the Body of Christ. Called to proclaim the hope and promise of Christ's love to a broken and hurting world. To a world that is certainly more broken and hurting than any of us have ever seen. And we will be more effective doing that together.

We will get through this. We will do it together. And one day—hopefully soon—we will once again be able to gather face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh, and we will see that, because of our faith, because of focusing on hope, because of focusing on abundance, because of focusing on love, things did change. Maybe not in an instant. But that they did change for the better. From death to life. From empty to full. From darkness to light.